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Crossing Paths between East and West. The Use of Counterfactual Thinking for the Concept of “Entangled Histories”

Juliane Schiel*

Abstract: »Was wäre gewesen, wenn die Mongolen nicht gekommen wären? – Vom Nutzen des Kontrafaktischen für das Konzept der „Verflechtungsgeschichten“«. This paper claims that historians need to address the contingency factor in history, and that counterfactual thinking can be a useful method of cross-checks allowing for a deeper understanding of causal and non-causal connections. However, counterfactual thinking needs to become incorporated into existing methodological approaches of modern historiography in order to be of any use. The paper therefore suggests integrating counterfactual thinking into the concept of “entangled histories” by Shalini Randeria, which is illustrated in a case study on the late Middle Ages. The complex interactions and interdependencies between the Mongolian Empire and the Latin West, and more specifically between the Mongolian leaders and the Dominican monks in the thirteenth century are described as a history of entanglement. But to what extent and in which ways are the historical phenomena, we are looking at, entangled? Here, three counterfactual scenarios may help to cross-check the potential and the limits of the entanglement.

Keywords: Middle Ages, Medieval, Mongol, Dominican, Mendicant, Latin, East, West, Entangled Histories, Chaos theory, Contingency, Causality, Counterfactual, Shalini Randeria, Niall Ferguson, Charles Robert Darwin.

Introduction

When biologists discovered that what we used to understand by “Darwinism” was based on a misunderstanding, Charles Robert Darwin had been dead for almost a hundred years. Only then, natural scientists learned to distinguish between the actual reflections of the British naturalist on the process of evolution and the interpretation of his theory by both contemporaries and modern scientists. The “tree-of-life” model, the concept of struggle and selection, and the idea of the “survival of the fittest” were only one side of Darwin’s evolutionary theory. When he sought to explain the diversity of life, he was extraordinarily puzzled by the irregularities and chaotic elements contradicting his

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attempt at a coherent explanation for the evolution of the species (Bredekamp 2005).

Only recently, Julia Voss, an art historian from Humboldt University, has shown in her thesis how much this misinterpretation of Darwin's thinking reveals an anthropological phenomenon in general and an epistemological problem in particular: about the difficulty of dealing with contingency and chaos (Voss 2007).¹ By studying the numerous drawings Darwin had made to develop his theory, Julia Voss detected a fundamental difference between the text and the image. While the narrative plot of Darwin's thoughts tended towards struggle and selection, his drawings were concerned with coincidence and randomness.² In his drawings, he showed the disorder and imperfection in the evolution of the species insisting on the tiny details that differentiated them from a well-formed, regular "tree-of-life" model. But when he tried to put his thoughts into words, the rules, laws and causes of evolution won over.

Generally speaking, the story of Darwin teaches us two things. First, one needs to reduce complexity. We would not be able to make sense of someone's actions and reactions, if we could not break down the world we live in to a somewhat simplified level. We need logical and clear explanations for things which happen to us. Second, this anthropological phenomenon causes an epistemological problem for historiography. What everyone does regarding his own life and entourage, historians do for human history in general. Historians try to find explanations for a certain turn of events, and the more logical the chain of causes and consequences they are constructing appears, the more acceptance they get for their interpretation from other historians (Schiel 2008, 125-6).

Over the last years, historiography has undergone a process of "complexisation". Historians were more and more influenced by a general paradigm shift that had taken place in natural sciences and humanities alike. Linear theories were challenged in mathematics, physics and climatology as well as in philosophy, sociology and historiography. But whereas natural scientists addressed the

¹ Horst Bredekamp tackles the same problem, but while Julia Voss interprets Darwin's diagrams as an innovative reaction to a new collection situation in the 19th century, Bredekamp sees the drawings as continuous with the collection tradition since the 16th century. Generally speaking, Julia Voss goes much further in her interpretation of the results for the humanities. While Bredekamp's book is more a sketch of ideas, Voss studied the phenomena in detail.

² Julia Voss on the relation between text and image in Darwin's theory: "während sich in der geschriebenen Fassung der Akzent hin zum narrativen Plot des Überlebenskampfes in der Auslese verschob, dominierte im Bild das Zufallsprinzip. Der Konkurrenz, dem Ringen und Kampf verlieh Darwin im Medium der Sprache Ausdruck, bis hin zu der sich verselbstständigenden Formulierung vom 'survival of the fittest', die in vielen Sprachen zum geflügelten Wort geworden ist. Das andere Prinzip der Evolution aber, den Zufall, die Variation, die Unordnung und das Unvollkommene feilte er in Bildern aus. (...) Die Bilddramaturgie bestimmt der Zufall, die aus den Knotenpunkten aussprühenden Linien, deren Ausfächern zufällige Variation symbolisiert" (Voss 2007, 21).

problem of chaotic behaviour and tried to integrate those dynamics into their models and calculations, scholars in the humanities stressed the multiplicity and the heterarchy of their objects. More and more historians came to question the master narratives of historical progress and evolution and contested all kinds of teleological thinking in historiography. (Daniel 2001; Conrad and Randeria 2002; Budde et al. 2006).

Thereby, all the new historical approaches that sprang up from this general paradigm shift tackle the multidimensional aspect of human history. None of them, however, addresses the factors of contingency and randomness. This is exactly where we can learn from the book by Julia Voss. Darwin did not know how to put irregularity and chance into words, so he helped himself with drawings. Historians have the same problem. They analyse phenomena that are not unidirectional, but they write texts with a beginning and an end. Historical accounts of the past – although they might talk about the complexity and contingency of human life – still have a linear structure. Yet, if we continue to exclude the fact that human history contains irregular, illogical and contingent elements, then we do to human history what Darwinism did to Darwin.

In this paper, I argue that counterfactual thinking is an appropriate tool to address the problem. As Niall Ferguson, one of the most prominent advocates of counterfactual history, once stated: we need to acknowledge “the philosophical significance of chaos theory”. Chaos theory “reconciles the notions of causation and contingency” (Ferguson 1998, 79).³ What historians need is a shift towards “chaostory” including counterfactual “simulations based on calculations about the relative probability of plausible outcomes in a chaotic world” (Ferguson 1998, 85).⁴

Some general remarks

Before I turn to the practical use of counterfactual thinking in a case study on the Late Middle Ages, let me outline some general reflections on causation and contingency and on the possible use of counterfactual thinking in historiography.

First, the factor of contingency cannot be measured – neither with quantitative nor with qualitative methods. We can count the causes we are detecting to explain historical events and we can bring them in an hierarchical order by saying that cause *a* was more decisive than cause *b*, but we cannot say how much the sum of the causes we possibly find makes out of the hundred percent of the story. Contingency is a dark figure which is difficult to handle.

³ For the complex relation between counterfactuals and causality see also Roese 1995, 11–15.

⁴ The use of chaos theory for history has also been discussed by Herbst 2004.

Second, the proportion of causation and contingency is not constant in history. A side glance on chaos theory may help to illustrate the argument. Chaos theory distinguishes situations of strong and weak causality, where strong refers to a high predictability of the evolution of a system and weak to a low predictability (Schuster 1984; Lorenz 1993). Speaking for history, a situation of relative stability usually corresponds to strong causalities, whereas in a context of political, social or economic disorder the proportion of contingency grows. The more chaotic a situation gets, the less sufficient pure causal explanations are to embrace the whole setting.

Third, counterfactual history asks for alternative scenarios of history by sounding their plausibility and relative probability compared to the actual turn of events. Therefore, it is an appropriate tool to address contingency. Counterfactual history includes the consequences of contingency and randomness in the interpretation of a historical situation and helps to distinguish situations of strong causality from those of weak causality. Yet, so far, counterfactual history remains marginalised. It exists in a sort of an air bubble as an alternative historiography, rarely taken seriously, and without theoretical or methodological links to other historical approaches.⁵ However, if causation and contingency are to be reconciled, as Niall Ferguson has claimed, then counterfactual thinking needs to be incorporated into modern historiography. Consequently, if counterfactual thinking is to be freed from its status of (self-) isolation, then we have to look for possible connections and potential convergences between counterfactual thinking and other historical approaches.

What I would like to suggest here is to incorporate counterfactual thinking into one specific historical approach. Of course, there are many possibilities to integrate counterfactual thinking into existing methods and theories and to make it an integral part of modern historiography. But in order to illustrate my argument in a concrete case study, I would like to focus on one specific concept: it is the concept of “entangled histories”. The concept, going back to the sociologist and social anthropologist Shalini Randeria, was originally developed to describe the relation between the “West” and the “Rest” in colonial and postcolonial times (Randeria 1999).⁶ Shalini Randeria suggested “replacing a ‘history of absences’, as in discourses of modernisation theory, or a history by analogy, as in discourses of alternative modernities, by a relational perspective which foregrounds processes of interaction and intermixture in the entangled histories of uneven modernities. Such a perspective”, according to Randeria, “would not privilege Western historical experience or trajectories and would be sensitive to the particularities of the non-Western society under study”

⁵ Rare examples for serious attempts of counterfactual history, besides the book by Niall Ferguson already mentioned, are: Demandt 2001; Tetlock et al. 2006.

⁶ Related concepts are the one of “connected histories” (Subrahmanyam 1997) and the one of “histoire croisée” (Werner and Zimmermann 2003).

(Randeria 2006, 216–7). Randeria’s concept of “entangled histories” immediately spread to other historical contexts and soon became a popular term for a better description of cultural exchange processes. Early modern and modern historians took it to describe the cultural interplay between the colonist and the colonised (Conrad 2003; Eckert 2004; Eckert 2006; Freitag and von Oppen 2005), and medievalists used it as an alternative model for transfer processes between Christendom and Islam, Rome and Byzantium or Europe and Asia (Höfert and Salvatore 2000; Höfert 2008a; Höfert 2008b).⁷ Generally speaking, Randeria’s term of “entangled histories” has become a “travelling concept”, helping to break with the essentialist conception of culture and the simplified idea of a giving and a receiving culture. It challenges well-established dichotomies like “modern and traditional”, “centre and periphery” and “powerful and powerless” and highlights interactions and mutual interdependencies. But to what extent and in which ways are the historical phenomena, we are looking at, entangled? Here, the incorporation of counterfactual thinking in the methodological approach of “entangled histories” may help to test the actual degree and nature of entanglement. Counterfactual thinking is to be used as a means of cross-check.⁸

This is what I would like to demonstrate in my case study on the reciprocal effects between the Mongolian Empire and Latin society in the 13th century. I chose the period of the Mongolian expansion since it has certain characteristics which make it promising for the epistemological interest of this paper. The unexpected appearance of the Mongols, whose homeland was completely unknown to the West, produced a situation of high instability. Speaking in terms of chaos theory, the unforeseen assaults from the East led to a situation of weak causality and low predictability. As a consequence, the contingency factor became more important. The demolition of a well-established view of the world not only destabilised the general framework of Latin society, it also increased the potential for creative renewal and change. The probability of alternative scenarios with a different historical outcome was higher-than-

⁷ Within the last years, several medievalist networks and scientific programmes were set up in Germany and Switzerland tackling the time of the Middle Ages in a transcultural perspective and using concepts like the one from Shalini Randeria and others. See for example the DFG-Schwerpunktprogramm 1173 “Integration und Desintegration der Kulturen im europäischen Mittelalter” (Borgolte et al. 2008), the “Göttinger Arbeitskreis für transkulturelle Geschichte der Vormoderne”, the scientific network “Vormoderne monarchische Herrschaftsformen im transkulturellen Vergleich” (<http://www.monarchietranskult.uni-bonn.de> (accessed December 1, 2008)) and the one titled “Selbstzeugnisse in transkultureller Perspektive” (Bähr et al. 2007).

⁸ In a way, the use of counterfactual thinking as it is suggested here can be compared to the mnemonic theory of the medievalist Johannes Fried. Similar to Fried’s use of the critic of human memory (“Gedächtniskritik”) for the interpretation of historical sources, counterfactual thinking as a tool of cross-check intends to strengthen the historian’s distrust of simple causations and all too coherent master narratives (Fried 2004).

average. Therefore, counterfactual thinking is an appropriate tool for the study of this period as it highlights accidental convergences and integrates alternative scenarios in an overall interpretation of the period.

To treat the specific entanglement between the Mongolian East and the Latin West in a counterfactual way and to cross-check the potential and the limits of the entanglement, I chose to focus on two important players of the time and the ways they got involved with each other: the Mongolian leaders and the Dominican monks.

The case study

Around the year 1170, two men were born who never even heard of each other within their lifetimes, but whose stories became closely linked later on. The one, about three years older than the other, was born in the Far East, on the northern boarder of the Jin Dynasty, China, the other in a small town of Old Castile, Spain. Both, when they were in their thirties and forties, used the dynamics of their time to launch a movement that would change the world around them. The one from Northeast Asia, called Temüjin later known as Genghis Khan, became a military leader and founded the largest contiguous empire in history. The other, Domingo de Guzmán, afterwards venerated as Saint Dominic, used the mendicant movement of the time and set up a new monastic community, called the Order of Preachers (*Ordo fratrum Praedicatorum*), whose members, within a few years, spread all over the Latin world to combat heresy.⁹ While one benefited from the nomadic structures of the steppe for his success, the other was helped by the recent process of urbanisation in Southwest Europe.¹⁰ In 1215, when Genghis Khan captured Yanjing (today known as Beijing), the capital of the Jin Dynasty in Northern China, Dominic founded the first house of his new religious order in Toulouse, Southern France. In 1221, after having put an end to the Khwarezm Empire, Mongolian troops entered into the Caucasus region, while Dominic died in Bologna, Italy, having created around sixty convents, spread all over Europe.

Two lives, two movements. So far, the stories of Genghis Khan and Dominic have not met. So far, there is no entanglement, no causal link between the two movements. Their biographies and the dynamics they had initiated are paralleled by pure randomness. This was to change when Dominicans and

⁹ In the early thirteenth century, new congregations sprang up in different parts of the Latin world preaching the return to the ideal of poverty lived by the first disciples and congregations in early Christendom. The so-called mendicant movement then led to the foundation of several new monastic orders, among them the Order of Preachers.

¹⁰ For the history of the Mongols see Spuler 1968; Weiers 2004. For the history of the Dominican Order still relevant Mortier 1903–1920; see also Horst 1985; Melville and Müller 2007.

Mongols learned about each other and when members of these two groups actually met (Jackson 2005).

The year Dominic died, Latin crusaders heard for the first time about a new military force in the East. The crusaders' euphoria since the capture of Constantinople in 1204 and their hope to overthrow Islam by a reunion of all Churches merged with apocalyptic prophecies that, for their final victory, Christians were going to be helped by a distant power from the East (Bezzola 1974, 13-31; Klopprogge 1993, 105-52).¹¹ Six years later, when Genghis Khan died as the ruler of an empire reaching from Manchuria to the Caspian Sea and from Siberia to the Hindu Kush, Hugolinus, a close friend of Dominic, was elected Pope Gregory IX and helped the Mendicant movement to become a well-established and widely respected institution of the Roman Church. Almost the same year, the Order's Chapter General adopted the constitutions of Dominic's successor, Jordan of Saxony, as the legal basis of the Order, and extended the Preachers' sphere of influence to Poland, Dacia, Greece, and the Holy Land. In 1237, the constitutional basis of the Order was completed, remaining effective for the next few hundred years, and the Dominican houses numbered three hundred. The same year, the Golden Horde, the Western wing of the Mongolian army, won victory over the Kipchaks and was ready to enter Europe while the southern part of the army pushed towards Mesopotamia.

Also in 1237, Pope Gregory IX received two urgent letters from Dominican monks. One came from the Dominican prior of Jerusalem, Philippus, seeking to unite Christians from East and West (*Litterae ad dominum Papae*). The other was written by Julianus, a friar from Hungary, who had been sent by the Hungarian King Bela IV to explore the land east of Transylvania and bring the Gospel to a pagan people believed to have Hungarian blood (*Epistola de vita Tartarorum*). Both knew about the Mongolian expansion and transferred their knowledge to the West. But whereas Philippus stressed the willingness of ecclesiastical dignitaries in the East to cooperate with the papacy in Rome, neglecting the Mongolian threat as an important cause of their openness, Julianus focused on the alien menace sweeping away all hopes for Dominican activity on the Eastern borders of the Latin world. While the letter from Jerusalem was full of enthusiasm and optimism, the one from Hungary painted a most terrifying scenario.

Four years later, the threat had become real. In winter 1241/42, Mongolian troops devastated large parts of Hungary and Poland, and many of the freshly founded Preachers' convents in Eastern Europe were destroyed (Pfeiffer 1913). In 1244, Pope Innocent IV chose Dominican and Franciscan friars as official diplomats of the Latin Church in order to start an investigation on the character

¹¹ Most prominent the Crusaders' chronicles of Jacob of Vitry (*Historia Hierosolymitana*) and Oliver of Paderborn (*Historia Damiatina*).

and purpose of the Mongolian aggression.¹² From now on, Dominican monks – together with their Franciscan counterparts – spearheaded Western contacts with the Mongolian leaders. Even though merchants, crusaders, pilgrims and adventurers also quickly made the acquaintance of Mongolian culture and politics, it was the friars' reports which were copied and recopied and essentially formed the Western image of the Mongols (Schmieder 1994; Münkler 2000).

On the other side, the Mongolian perception of the Latins was twofold: on the one hand the crusaders' armies for whom the Asian horsemen had relatively high military esteem, and on the other hand the barefooted, poorly dressed Mendicants who denied to bring presents and to worship the Mongolian leaders, but who nevertheless proved quite reliable for the transmission of letters and messages to Western leaders (Jackson 2005, 135-6).

Interestingly, the histories of the two movements, the Mongolian and the Mendicant expansion, can be paralleled at least until the end of the 13th century. When the Mongolian Empire reached its maximum expansion in 1241, Pope Gregory IX granted a series of extraordinary privileges to the Mendicant brethren which had never been given to a monastic order before. The famous quotation of "*Ego bullabo*" handed down to us from Pope Gregory IX sheds light on the extraordinary position which the Mendicants had already obtained. It is said that Gregory, when he met the Dominican Master General at the time, John the Teutonic, declared: "Write down anything you wish for your Order. I will be the anvil, you the hammer. You tell and I will issue the bull." (B. Vobis ex-
tramam; Mortier 1903, 328).

Both, Mongols and Dominicans, reached the peak of their first uncontested successes in the 1240s and 1250s while first diplomatic relations were established between Mongolian khans and Mendicant envoys. The Mongols had never been feared as much as in the 1250s when they put an end to the Abbasid Caliphate by taking Baghdad in 1258 and when they returned to Eastern Europe the same year to do even more damage to Poland, Prussia and Lithuania than they did the first time they came (Jackson 2005, ch. 5). The Mendicants in return had never after been as uncontested, their attraction to clergy and lay-

¹² Shortly before the opening of the First Council of Lyons, Pope Innocent IV sent two Dominican (one headed by Ascelin, another by Andrew of Longjumeau) and two Franciscan missions (the one guided by John of Plano Carpini, the other by Lawrence of Portugal) to four different parts of the Mongolian Empire. He charged them to collect information on the foreign power, including their origins, their religious beliefs, their way of life and their means and tactics of warfare. Besides several letters from military and political leaders from the East, two extensive rapports from these diplomatic missions are handed down to us: the one very well-known, written by the Franciscan friar John of Plano Carpini (*Historia Mongalorum*), the other less known but equally important, written by the Dominican Simon of Saint-Quentin (*Historia Tartarorum*), a comrade of Ascelin. Both became integrated in the chronicle of the Dominican encyclopaedist Vincent of Beauvais (*Speculum historiale*).

men, to simple and educated men never as high as in the beginning of the 1250s when, at the university of Paris, they had managed to occupy 10 of the 12 chairs of theology appointed by the papacy (Mortier 1903, 442).

However, the myth of the invincible aggressor from the East as well as the hope for spiritual renewal by the new Mendicant Orders soon started to decline. First, the Mendicant leaders got involved in a large-scale university debate in Paris, keeping them on the move for the next fifteen years.¹³ Although supported by the papacy for most of the time, the essential points and central characteristics of the new Orders were at stake, and for a couple of years, it was not clear whether the Mendicant scholars would be able to defend the exceptional mode of functioning and the far reaching fields of activity of the new Orders. Then, in 1260, one year after the death of khan Mongke, the last Mongolian emperor to have governed the Mongolian Empire as a whole, Egyptian Mamluks defeated the Mongols in the famous battle of Ayn Jalut. For the first time, an army had managed to resist the Mongolian aggression and to fight them back. Mongolian expansion had come to a halt. Only a few months later, in 1261, the Byzantine emperor Michael VIII Palaiologos recaptured Constantinople from the Latins, and not only Italian merchants but also Mendicant friars were expelled from important bases in Greece and the Aegean.

In 1261, both movements – although still strong – had visibly lost much of their initial impetus. Both had been transformed into a somehow more established, more stable status.¹⁴ It was in the aftermath of these events that true diplomatic relations were installed between Latin and Mongolian rulers, still almost exclusively mediated by Mendicant envoys and missionaries. More than twenty years of intense diplomatic exchange followed. Whereas the Mongolian leaders in Persia, called the Ilkhans, hoped for military support against the Muslim Mamluks,¹⁵ Mendicant envoys dreamed of the conversion of the Mongols under their direction as the greatest missionary success in the history of the Roman Church (Lupprian 1981). When the Ilkhanate leader Hulagu re-

¹³ From 1252 to 1272 the intellectual and administrative leaders of the Mendicant Orders got involved in a major conflict with the university of Paris and the secular clergy in which the legal and theological bases of the new monastic orders were put up for discussion. See Dufeil 1972, and more specifically for the implications of the conflict on the Dominican Order, see Horst 2006.

¹⁴ The Mongolian Empire, soon after the death of Mongke, became divided in four parts, progressively acting independently from, and sometimes even against each other (Jackson 2005, 124–28). The Mendicants, in the meanwhile, had won the first great controversy in Paris against William of Saint-Amour. Thomas of Aquinas and Bonaventura had been accepted as *magistri* of the university of Paris, a new Dominican curriculum for theological formation had been worked out and the unlimited right to teach at university had been returned to Mendicant professors (Köhn 1976, 1–37).

¹⁵ The most prominent example for the Ilkhan's perspective is the Syrian travel account of the Mongolian monk and ambassador Rabban Sauma. For an English translation of the account see: The history of Yaballah III.

ceived and supported Mendicant missionaries as personal advisers at his court and sent solemn embassies to Western kings and to the papacy in Rome, the Dominican Master General Humbert of Romans promoted the foundation of language schools and the formation of missionaries on a grand scale, and scholars like Thomas Aquinas and others wrote theological polemics and manuals for missionary practice.¹⁶

It was only in the second half of the 1280s and in the 1290s, that these high mutual hopes were spoiled. In 1285, the Golden Horde had again started attacks on Central and South-Eastern Europe, especially Bulgaria. In 1295, the admired Ilkhanate leader Ghazan declared his conversion to Islam, and in 1299/1300 his troops occupied Syria.¹⁷

From then onwards, Western expectations of the Mongols were less characterised by eschatological visions, although the Latin image of the Mongols remained ambiguous, depending on place and time. The Ilkhanate leaders, however, had lost their interest in the Latin rulers and their envoys, although Mendicant activities within their empire were still better tolerated than elsewhere in the Islamic world.

Yet, the entanglement of the two stories, the Mongolian and the Dominican one, went on for another 150 years, only being briefly interrupted by the Black Death in the 1340s. Mendicant missionaries made use of the *Pax Mongolica* to extend their sphere of influence and to establish Preacher's houses wherever Latin merchants and travellers were supposed to pass by. In the 14th century, Dominican activity was especially strong in Persia and Armenia, and subsequently backed out to Greece and the Aegean with the gradual disintegration of Mongolian rule in Central Asia (Altaner 1924; Loenertz 1937; Delacroix-Besnier 1997).

Obviously, from 1221, and even more from 1237 onwards, it was no longer by pure randomness that the stories of the Mongolian khans and the Dominican Preachers followed a similar trajectory. Encounters between their representatives had added causal links to their further evolution, to their mental attitudes and political actions. No doubt, the Latins were altogether much more concerned with the Mongolian aggression than the Mongolian khans were with the Christian rulers and their scholastic envoys from the West. But how can we say to what extent the action of the one mattered to the other? How important were the encounters with the Mongols for the evolution of the Dominican Order in the 13th century? How much did the diplomatic interlocutions with the Mendicant brethren influence the khans' decisions? And in which ways did the

¹⁶ One of the most influential handbooks for missionaries at the time was Thomas Aquinas (*Summa contra gentiles*); see also Humbert of Romans (*Opusculum tripartitum*) and Riccoldo da Monte di Croce (*Libellus ad nationes orientales*).

¹⁷ Peter Jackson has called the Mongolian occupation of Syria "the high water-mark of Mongol-Latin relations" (Jackson 2005, 172).

Mendicants determine the Latin view and action towards the Mongols? How important was the entanglement for the sequel of their respective evolution, or did the other always remain on the very edge of the own world without major consequences? This is exactly where counterfactual thinking can help. I will deal with it in three parts, trying to demonstrate the degree of entanglement from different angles separately.¹⁸

Dominicans without Mongols

What if Dominicans and Mongols had never met? What if the Mongols had never entered Europe, never destroyed Mendicant convents, never came to be seen as a real threat to the rulers of the Latin West? How would the Dominican movement have evolved?

When Latin crusaders first heard about the Mongolian aggression, the Order of Preachers was still in its formative phase. While the legal basis, the *Constitutiones*, was in the making, its explosive dispersion was far from concluded; its message attracted masses and elites alike as something revolutionary and new. The Dominicans functioned as a projection screen for all sort of hopes and fears within the Roman Church and Western society in general, ranging from spiritual renewal and Christian unification to ecclesiastical disorder and social upheaval. However, seen from within, the main concern of the Dominicans in the first years of their existence was the combat of heretical ideas and the propagation of the pure Christian doctrine to all men, clerk and layman. Thereby, their activity was based on a sound theological and scholastic education of their adherents, formed to act as preachers and inquisitors. Their expansion basically followed two principles. They went where heretic movements were active, and they settled where they were likely to meet educated people: close to universities, in big cities, near by courts and trading centres. From Southern France, Saint Dominic's disciples spread to the universities of Paris, Bologna and Oxford for formation, to the cities of Tuscany and Castile, to Cologne and Rome for settlement, and to Southern Italy and Southeast Europe to fight heresy (Hinnebusch 2004).

If we try to zoom back into the years before the Latin West learned about the new military power in the East, it becomes quite clear that the Order of Preachers in its early stage was not a missionary order in the first place. Although the idea of converting the Infidel was never really absent in Dominican activity and even though Saint Dominic himself came to plan a missionary journey shortly before his death, it was not the original impulse, and it was not at all thought that mission outside Latinity was going to become a major field

¹⁸ I owe much of this approach to the enlightening counterfactual case study of Bauckham 2000.

of activity. Before 1221, the urban layman and the heretic were in their focus, not the Infidel outside Latinity (Altaner 1924, 1-9).

Now, would the Dominican Order have become a missionary order if the Mongols had stayed outside the Latin world? Obviously, we are not able to give a clear answer to this, but still counterfactual thinking may show the high probability of alternative scenarios.

In 1221, the followers of Saint Dominic in Southern France were not the only successful Mendicant movement of the time. Other congregations preaching poverty and the return to the ideals of the first disciples sprang up at the same time in different parts of Europe: most importantly, the friars of Saint Francis in Northern Italy, the *Ordo Fratrum Minorum*. Equally promoted by the papacy, Dominicans and Franciscans soon came to see each other (and were seen) as two competing Orders. Yet, their starting point was not quite the same. Although Franciscans soon followed Dominicans to university for scholastic education, their Order was much more based on the idea of the example of the poor, notably the unlearned poor, enabling believers and nonbelievers alike to see the truth of God. Franciscan convents, like their Dominican equivalent, spread extremely fast and all over the place, but unlike their preacher colleagues, they systematically transgressed the borders of the Latin world right from the beginning to live the example of Christ also in front of the Infidel.¹⁹ Their initial perspective was less intellectual but more universal. Now, since Dominicans and Franciscans as two similar, simultaneously emerged and therefore competing movements had to come to an arrangement with each other, it would have been the most plausible scenario to seek for a maximum of complementarity and to specialise in different domains: the one for a unification within Latinity bringing heretics back to orthodox beliefs, and the other for a unification on a global perspective acting on the rapprochement of the different Churches in East and West and the conversion of the Infidel.

A brief look at a later period of Dominican-Franciscan relations may help to illustrate the argument. About one hundred years later, the Latin Levant was dominated by political, commercial and military rivalries between Venice and Genoa (Lock 2005; Balard 2006). Curiously, the two Mendicant Orders stuck each to one of the two naval forces. While Franciscan convents were influential where Venetians held supremacy, Dominican settlement was particularly important in the strongholds of Genoese Romania. Where the Venetian and Genoese spheres of influence met – like in Constantinople or other important cities and commercial centres of the Levant – both Orders were present competing for influence while political and ecclesiastical leaders often pit the one against the other. In total, Dominican and Franciscan influence on the Latin Levant proved to be most powerful where their fields of competence were

¹⁹ Most prominent is here the example of Saint Francis himself who, in 1219, accompanied the Fifth Crusade to Egypt and came to preach the Gospel in front of Sultan Al-Kamil.

clearly separated (Delacroix-Besnier 1997, ch. 3).²⁰ Therefore, without the exceptional fears and hopes related to the Mongolian aggression, it would have been more probable that Dominicans and Franciscans had specialised in two different domains right from the beginning.

Now, if the Latins had only heard of the Mongolian troops but never had come to actually see them, again, another scenario for the evolution of the Dominican Order would have been more plausible. Given the assumption that the Mongols had stayed outside the Latin world, it would have been quite likely that the initial enthusiasm of the new Orders for the conversion of the Infidel would have ebbed away much faster than it actually did. While Franciscan friars in the Islamic world would have experienced a series of martyrdom, and Dominican pioneers in Transylvania and on the Balkans would have been confronted with major language barriers, it would have been more than tempting to concentrate on the areas where the message of the new Orders bore fruit: in the cities and universities of the Latin world and in diplomatic affairs at the courts of political leaders and at the papal Curia. The thankless campaigns on the outskirts of their field of activity would have been left to individuals with a special sense of mission, but it would most probably not have become an issue of high priority on the agenda of the Master and the Chapter General of the new Orders. Rather than the conversion of the Infidel, the idea of a universal Church union under the aegis of Rome could have become the major issue. If the Mongolian aggression had come to rest before meeting Latin territory in Eastern Europe or the Levant, Syrian, Armenian and Greek Christians seeking for help in the West would certainly have promoted Mendicant diplomatic efforts for ecumenical rather than missionary issues. In this case, in the long run, Philippus' hope for a speedy unification of all Christians would have been given precedence over the shocking news of an existential military threat from the Hungarian Julianus. For, Philippus' optimism was indeed much more in accordance with Western expectations of the time. The Latin conquest of Constantinople in 1204 and the rediscovery of Eastern Christianity beyond the Greek Orthodox Church had promoted eschatological hopes for a final victory of Christendom over Islam. Instead of language centres for Arab, Persian or Hebrew, the Order's Master Generals would have concentrated on the promotion of language skills like Greek, Armenian and Syrian for the ecumenical, rather than the interreligious dialogue.

²⁰ Similar observations can be made for the Mendicant mission of the 13th century. Whereas Franciscans were particularly active in the Far East, Dominicans dominated the missionary field in Persia and Armenia (Altaner 1924, ch. 10).

Mongols without Mendicants

Let's now turn to the opposite side and test the degree of entanglement between Mongols and Dominicans by asking counterfactual questions from another perspective: What if the Mongols had entered the Latin sphere without meeting Mendicant friars? Would their behaviour towards the Latin West have been different if they had not had the scholastically formed brethren as their interlocutors?

Without the Mendicant movement, Pope Innocent IV would certainly have chosen one or two of his cardinals as papal legates (as the papacy used to do since the High Middle Ages), or, if he wanted to send more envoys, a number of bishops loyal to the Curia (Schieffer 2008; Weiss 1995).²¹ King Bela IV from Hungary might have taken a Cistercian monk,²² and King Louis IX from France would probably have chosen an archbishop or one of his best and most allegiant bishops (Kintzinger 2008; Berg 2002; Autrand 1999). In that case, the diplomatic envoys would have worn proper ecclesiastical habits. They might even have brought precious presents or some other symbolic signs of respect to the Mongolian khans. As the Mongolian khans attached great importance to external marks of reverence, a bishop's robe might have been taken more seriously than the grey frock of the barefooted monks. On the other hand, at the early stage of the 1240s, even the most pompous appearance would not have altered the political and military tactics of the Mongols. Up to their first great defeat in 1260 at Ayn Jalut, the Mongolian leaders cleaved to the idea of submitting the whole world to their command. Mongolian khans would never even have thought of any alternative to either submission or death and destruction of their enemies – whether their diplomatic envoys were dressed up in purple and gold or not. Their precious presents would rather have been taken as a sign of submission than as a basis for negotiation (Jackson 2005, 45-9). A reference to an actual historical situation from that period may strengthen the argument: At Christmas 1248, Latin hopes for a conversion of the Mongolian Ilkhans to Christendom had reached its apogee. When Louis IX, king of France at the time, arrived in Cyprus, he was told that the Ilkhanate leader Guyuk bore strong sympathy towards the Christian doctrine and that he was willing to

²¹ The papal legates listed in the book by Stefan Weiss, containing 585 charters altogether, are almost exclusively cardinals, cardinal bishops, presbyters and deacons. The more important a delegation was, the higher the ecclesiastical position of the legates.

²² The Cistercian movement had been particularly active in Eastern Europe, on the Eastern borders of Christianity, see Knefelkamp 2001. Another possible candidate for Hungarian missions might have been the Teutonic Order. For, before the first Mendicant friars made their way to Hungary, King Andreas had called the Teutonic Order for help to support him in his subjugation of the rebellious Cumans. Even though the cooperation between the Hungarian crown and the Teutonic Order did not work very well, their cooperation might have lasted longer if the Mendicant friars had not taken the place. See Makkai 1991, 23–33; Kosztolnyik 1996.

convert. Immediately, the French king sent an experienced Dominican to the Ilkhanate court who, this time, was equipped with most sumptuous gifts. But by the time when the friar, called Andrew of Longjumeau, reached the court, Guyuk was already dead and his widow, governing the Ilkhanate Empire since then, interpreted the Western signs of enjoyment and congratulation as a symbol of submission (Richard 1983).

Latinity without Mendicants

Finally, let's once more change the perspective in order to cross-check the causal correlations of the actual line of events: How would the Latin West have reacted to the Mongolian threat if Pope Innocent IV and the kings of Hungary, France, England and Spain had had no Mendicant envoys at their disposition? What if the approbation of Dominican and Franciscan movement as accredited monastic orders of the Roman Church had failed and the Mongolian invasion had met the former ecclesiastical structures?

Then, even though the existence of the Mendicants did not really matter to the Mongolian khans, Latin contacts with the foreign power from Far East would probably have evolved quite differently right from the beginning. Let's assume that the papacy and those kings interested in the events on the Eastern borders of Latinity had chosen competent persons as diplomatic envoys and that at least some of them had returned safe and brought useful information about the unknown nomads. They still would have remained individuals assigned by individuals. They would have been sent on a specific purpose, for a limited period of time. Most of them were needed at home. The prolonged absence of a bishop or archbishop would have destabilized his diocese or put his power base at risk.

Maybe some of them had even suggested sending more people for a longer stay in order to learn the language of the foreign invaders, to get to know their culture and, potentially, to evangelise them. Yet, most of these envoys would not have had the same infrastructure behind them as the Mendicants actually had. Although the Roman Church used a dense network of parishes to quickly pass information within Latinity, there was not the same manpower freely available to act directly on the new situation.²³ The papal legates and royal ambassadors, bishops and cardinals in office as they were, would have depended on the goodwill and competence of their sponsors to commission the head of another group of people capable to put those ideas into practice. Doubt-

²³ The history of the Crusades provides a good illustration of the argument. The Roman Church was very strong in initialising and nourishing the spirit of the Crusades but ultimately failed to put the spiritual movement into concrete and successful action.

lessly, it would have taken longer to get a somewhat clear conception of the foreign power, and of the risks and chances linked to it.

By contrast, when the Mendicant diplomats returned from their mission, they not only reported back to their sponsors but also to the Master General of their Order, to the General of their home province and to their home monastery. All of those had the possibility to react more or less directly to what they had heard (Müller 2002). For an illustration, let's take the example of Humbert of Romans. He became Master General of the Dominican Order in 1254 and in this function, for the two following years, he sent circular letters to all provinces and convents of the Order calling for the proselytisation of the Mongols and other infidels. Thereby he claimed the foundation of language centres and instructed the Provincial Chapters to allow only the most educated and theologically and scholastically experienced brethren to follow the call (*Litterae encyclicae*, 16-20; 38-42). Indeed, a quicker and more comprehensive reaction to the new situation than this is barely imaginable. The Mendicant envoys functioned as a multiplier hardly replaceable by any other player of the time.

If the establishment of the Mendicant Orders had not been successful, maybe the papacy would have thought of the Military Orders in the Levant and the Hungarian king would have charged the Cistercians to go East and bring information on the unknown invaders. For the Cistercians as well as for the Military Orders in the Levant – founded at the time of the first Crusades by the end of the 11th and beginning of the 12th century – the initial drive was over when the Mongols pushed westwards. Since the second half of the 12th century, a halt was put to the Cistercian expansion, and in the Levant, the ongoing failures of the crusaders had brought the Military Orders into discredit. For both, the Mongolian threat could have become a chance for revival if the freshly arrived Mendicant Orders had not taken their place. But then, very likely, the Latin knowledge and the image of the Mongols in the West would not have been quite the same. At this point, it would be interesting to ask a specialist on the Cistercian Order or one of the Military Orders to outline a scenario of how those groups would have reacted to the Mongolian advance if they were called to be the pioneers of the West. However, since I am not a specialist in those fields, I will stop here and try to come to some conclusions.

Conclusions

Obviously, the counterfactual argumentation demonstrated here can not be more than a first sketch of ideas. Each argument would still have to be tested in greater detail; it would have to be confronted with more source material than I had the space to do in this piece. Yet, what I hope to have shown is the potential of counterfactual thinking as a useful means of cross-check for the concept of “entangled histories”. Thereby, four different practices of counterfactual thinking became apparent.

First, by experimentally eliminating one element of the overall picture counterfactual thinking enables us to highlight inner forces and dynamics of other elements in order to better explore their potential and their limits. The Mendicant explorations hardly influenced the military actions of the Mongolian khans at all in the first decades of their expansion. Inversely, the existence of the Dominican and Franciscan brethrens was a stroke of luck for the West having a highly educated man-power available ready to turn the initial threat into a fruitful extension of the Western horizon. First of all, however, the event of 1241 turned out to be an unforeseen fluke for the Mendicants themselves who were to become the Latin “winners” of the Mongolian assault and who fundamentally formed the Mongolian image in the West. If the Mongols had not entered the Latin world, it is most likely that the Mendicant Orders would not have played such a prominent role in Latin history.

Second, by contrasting a given historical situation with an alternative probable scenario we can challenge traditional lines of argument and well-established master narratives. Seen from before 1221, or even from before 1237, the Order of Preachers was not quite on his way to become a missionary order and to broaden the Western horizon. Dominicans went right until the borders of Latinity ready to assist Latins in Greece and the Levant or in Southern Spain and Northern Africa, but they were not about to transgress boundaries and to confront the Other. Without the Mongols entering the Latin world, the large literature of missionary treatises dominated by Dominican intellectuals is not very likely to have gained such an extent. Counterfactual reflection thus calls us to differentiate our view on the early period of the Dominican order. The energetic potential of the young Order of Preachers was multiplied by the Mongolian challenge. The accidental coincidence of the Mongolian and the Dominican expansion was much more decisive for the further evolution of the Order than we are used to think.

Third, to test the soundness of a counterfactual scenario, it proves helpful to compare one historical situation with another similar situation and its actual outcome. As mathematicians use the “proof by contradiction” to check the evidence of a given assumption (Franklin and Daoud 1996, ch. 6), in historiography a comparison with similar situations may be used to test the plausibility of alternative scenarios.²⁴ Studying the Dominican-Franciscan relations of a later period helps to imagine their evolution at an earlier stage without the arrival of the Mongols. Dominicans and Franciscans, throughout the Late Middle Ages, resolved their competitive situation in the diaspora by clearly delineating their fields of action and by seeking for a maximum of complementarity. Without the sudden importance of the mission of the Infidel given by the arrival of the Mongols and the discovery of the Far East, the Dominicans would

²⁴ For a very enlightening article on the use of historical evidence as a proof by contradiction for counterfactual claims see: Pork 1985.

very probably have left the field of mission to the Franciscans by focusing on their initial task to combat heresy.

Fourth, by asking about the quality of the entanglement of two historical phenomena like the Mongolian and the Dominican movement, we are able to highlight the complex relation of causation and contingency. Four different phases of entanglement between Mongols and Dominicans may be distinguished here: a first phase of unintentional contact lasting from the first rumours to the actual clash of 1241, a second phase of unilaterally intentional contact dating from 1244 to 1260, a third phase of intentional diplomatic exchange and mutual interest from both sides up to around 1291, and finally a fourth phase of cultural merge but fading mutual interest.²⁵ Obviously, convergences between both sides were the highest in the third phase. Consequently, here the entanglement is characterised by a high degree of causality while the contingency factor is especially high in the first phase of contacts. Over the time, causation won over contingency. Whereas the entanglement between the Dominican and the Mongolian movement initially happened by chance, it then increasingly became a sort of “elective affinity”, mutually influencing and reinforcing dynamics on both sides.²⁶ The bigger the proportion of chance in contrast to necessity, the more diverging plausible alternative scenarios are.

Generally speaking, counterfactual thinking reminds us that all research is based on hypotheses. “What-if”-questions clearly strengthen the experimental dimension of modern historiography and broaden the hypothetical field. But as long as counterfactual thinking remains isolated from other methodological approaches of modern historiography, it is hard to use its benefits. What I wanted to suggest here is that we need to address the contingency factor in history and that counterfactual thinking can be a useful method of cross-checks allowing for a deeper understanding of causal and non-causal connections. And if I managed to draw a picture of the period of the Mongolian assault that resembles more Darwin’s irregular drawings than his linear writings, I would be more than glad.

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²⁵ The different degrees of entanglement could also be expressed in terms of “Kulturberührung”, “Kulturzusammenstoß”, “Kulturbeziehung” and “Kulturverflechtung” by Bitterli 1986.

²⁶ For the concept of “elective affinity” (German: “Wahlverwandtschaft”) see Weber 1972, 210. For the application of the concept of Max Weber to historical contexts see Scheller 2005.

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